

Improving the Intelligence Estimate Process

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The National Intelligence Estimate, the premier product of the Intelligence Community, is one of our least used and most ill-regarded products. I am certainly not the first person to discover this. Two major studies done since 1976—one by [redacted]¹ and another by [redacted]² came to the same conclusion. One senior intelligence officer has told me that similar complaints were heard as far back as the Allen Dulles era.

With the exception of NIE 11-3/8 (*Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict Through the Late 1980s*), and perhaps one or two others, NIEs are not used in formulating foreign policy, in making policy decisions, or in implementing those decisions. Nor are they particularly helpful as a warning device or as a means to identify future problems. NIEs often serve only as compendiums of data that policymakers can use as reference material—hardly the role envisioned by the founders of our intelligence system.

Based on several case studies that have led to extensive discussions with policymakers in State, Defense, and the NSC staff, the problems revolve around five key factors:

- NIEs tend to be irrelevant to the problems policymakers are trying to resolve, partly because they do not focus on the operational aspects of problems and partly because they do not explore various policy options in sufficient depth to satisfy policy formulation.

- They are not sufficiently analytical; they tend to be descriptive or packed with data. Often, contrasting

¹ "An Assessment of National Foreign Intelligence Production," Intelligence Community Staff Paper, December 1976.

² "National Estimate: An Assessment of the Product and the Process," Intelligence Monograph, Center for the Study of Intelligence, April 1977.

views of the same situation are buried in an attempt to achieve a consensus.

- They tend to be conservative in making predictions about the future and imprecise in forecasting trends.

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- They do not provide explanations for differing perceptions of events, or arguments about the concluding judgments. Alternatives that might have been discussed are often thrown out before the final papers are presented.

- They provide no new or unique information, but are a rehash of what policymakers already know.

While I can agree with [redacted] and company that some of these criticisms display a certain ignorance of the Intelligence Community and its process and that some of the results of the NIE mechanism, especially in its ability to predict the future, may inevitably be doomed to giving the consumers less than they want, I think it is significant that the same criticisms are still being raised even after several attempts to remedy the situation. Clearly, we have not done enough to make the NIE a more useful tool for the policymaker.

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What Policymakers Use

My research and the discussion with policymakers indicate that certain of our publications have considerable impact on the policy process and are being used in the ways envisioned by creators of the Intelligence Community.

The papers prepared for the formal Policy Review Memoranda (PRM) system centered in the National Security Council. These papers are usually the product of an intelligence working group that is a subgroup of the PRM working group. The intelligence working group is often chaired by an NIO or designee of the DCI and this chairman then attends the policy working group sessions. In many cases the system is much more informal, and intelligence and policy people work together to produce the PRM. Although the intelligence contributions sometimes get lost in the policy papers, their influence is judged to be quite significant, according to those who are heavily involved in the PRM process. These contributions are usually policy relevant and seem to be providing the kinds of materials needed in policy formulation.

The less formal contributions—often in the form of uncoordinated typescripts—that are provided to the Special Coordinating Committee (SCC). These are used by the NSC to make more rapid decisions on foreign policy matters. They often answer specific questions posed by policymakers, but intelligence participants in the SCC—attendance varies according to geographic area, expertise, and other factors—are free to add other material as they see fit. The less formal contributions—some of them given in oral briefings as well as in papers—are also judged to be highly useful and policy relevant by our respondents.

Informal briefings, consultations, and "quick-and-dirty" papers provided to individual policymakers. Consumers have indicated that they find it relatively easy to obtain this kind of support, especially in areas where there are longstanding relationships between policymakers and intelligence production offices, and that they find them extremely useful.

Surprisingly, policymakers had many positive things to say about current intelligence, even though they recognize that this kind of reporting probably does not enter into decisionmaking per se. Although it is quite clear that most policy consumers, especially area specialists, see incoming intelligence traffic at about the same time as intelligence officers, the policymakers say they have little time to do much with the information. They seem to be relying on intelligence analysts to put the material into a conceptual frame-

work or to synthesize bits and pieces to make a complete story. These incremental additions to the knowledge held by policymakers are useful, according to their responses. They feel much the same way about individual pieces of raw intelligence, and they often do not make a distinction between raw human source reporting and finished current intelligence.

Intelligence Gaps

The contributions described above are all entering the policy review and decision process at about the same stage—at the point where those people who make foreign policy are formulating options, wrestling with alternative strategies, or seeking to implement general guidelines in specific cases. At this stage in the policy process, the problems have generally been recognized and the course of events leading to the problem are well known. It appears, from the evidence uncovered so far, that policymakers are generally satisfied with the interagency intelligence process that supports this stage in policy formulation. Policymakers find, however, that there are some serious gaps in the intelligence they need, particularly as to:

- Policy problems that they know exist, but about which they have done little or nothing, either because of low priority or because they do not understand the problem completely.
- Problems policymakers have not yet recognized, but which may require action.
- Problems that do not yet exist, but which can be foreseen with some degree of clarity and which will probably require eventual action.
- Multidisciplinary issues that transcend geographic interests and that are not driven by events.

These are the areas which, traditionally, estimates are designed to address, but the record seems somewhat dismal. These are the gaps that policymakers complain estimates do not fill, and they have been complaining for some time. Since we have been successful in satisfying policymakers' needs in some areas, I suggest that we try to translate these same approaches to those areas where the NIE process has been weak. We have

done reasonably well in supporting the policy process that revolves around the PRM/SCC system in this administration, and I think the record will probably show that intelligence community support for similar systems in previous administrations is equally successful.

I have several suggestions on how to improve the policy relevance of NIEs:

(1) The NIOs should be, in the first instance, the prime movers in determining what estimates are needed and wanted. They are also in a position to determine what material should be treated in the IIM format. What the NIOs seem to lack is a forum where they can exchange information with each other and can review the demands of their various policy consumers. It is also unclear that NFAC has any way of translating into a coordinated whole the demands expressed by policy consumers. There is considerable evidence that each NIO translates perceived demand for intelligence production—including NIEs and IIMs—as he individually feels best. There should be more effort to determine the end product on an interactive basis.

(2) Having decided to do an NIE, the NIOs usually hold interagency terms of reference meetings to determine the scope of the estimates. I suggest that this meeting should include working-level representatives from those policy offices that have a stake in the estimate and an interest in its outcome. This system—which seems to work so well in the PRM/SCC process—would help ensure that the estimate will touch on those areas policymakers want to know about. I am not suggesting that an interagency combined intelligence-policy working group should be used to inhibit the estimate in any way, nor that policy representatives should have any sort of veto over the proceedings. Rather, I think policy offices should be encouraged to participate in order to be sure the end product will meet their needs. Additional participation by the working-level policy representatives could take place in reviewing interagency inputs or whatever draft is put together, to see that issues are being addressed, but again, no veto would be implied.

(3) The aim of the NIE should not necessarily be to reach an agreed position, but to ensure that the

arguments, assumptions, adversary positions, and, if possible, final judgments are laid out clearly for policymakers. Watered down, coordinated positions should be avoided. An effort should be made to describe various aspects of the problem and to present a clear statement about the variables—and the unknowables.

The evidence in my research shows that the influence of intelligence on policymakers is often determined by how it is presented. The impact of an NIE can be increased considerably according to the way it is sold by the NIO to senior policy officials. This may involve giving short briefings—a method judged highly effective by policy people in terms of their ability to retain the material—or discussing the results with senior staffers. In any event, it seems clear that the job is not complete when the NIE is published, but that an after-action effort by the NIO is needed to see that policymakers get the benefit of the interagency effort.

The NIOs must have a mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness and usefulness of the NIE so as to determine the course of future estimates, provide feedback to analysts, and ensure that the estimates are reaching the proper audience. This problem—which may extend throughout the range of NFAC production—can probably best be solved by developing an evaluation mechanism similar to that used by the Directorate of Operations in assessing human source intelligence. Basically, the system involves rather well-organized periodic consultations with policy consumers to find out if the product is “on the mark.” NFAC has no such system and probably should develop one if it is properly to assess its own product.³

There are some who will argue that an effort to work more closely with policymakers in framing NIEs, in inviting working-level policy officials to participate in the NIE process, and in “selling” NIEs to consumers will somehow destroy the objectivity the Intelligence Community fights to maintain, and for which the independent CIA was created. I disagree. In the course of my research, I have discovered that there is both within CIA and in other parts of the Intelligence Community a pride of professionalism that works against any tendency toward losing objectivity. Those

³ A forthcoming paper of the author will deal with intelligence production tasking and evaluation.

of us who have worked closely with our colleagues in INR and DIA recognize that they do suffer pressures from senior officials to "back the party line" on occasion, but that their record of maintaining independent judgments is a good one. After all, CIA officials have also been criticized for failing to take a line contrary to the wishes of the administration in power. I am not suggesting that maintaining objectivity is easy—merely that an accomplished professional in intelligence will try to do so no matter where he or she is employed.

Some people have suggested to me, after hearing about the topic of my research, that I might find out that intelligence has no impact on the policy process at all. The evidence is certainly to the contrary. Still, there is much to be done, and an overhaul of the NIE process to make the impact of NIEs as significant as some of the other products we turn out seems to be long overdue.

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